

FREEFALLIN'

U.S. AIR FORCE ACADEMY CADETS LEAP INTO THE "PUREST FORM OF FLIGHT"

Story and photos by Master Sgt. Ken Wright

The world is a big place, but it looks a heck of a lot bigger when you're plummeting toward it at more than 100 miles-per-hour. Just ask any one of the 650 U.S. Air Force Academy cadets who went through the school's Airmanship 490 course last year.

The name may sound more like an upper level college course — complete with lecture hall and guest speakers — but rest assured, the experience is anything but static.

Airmanship 490 teaches basic freefall parachuting at the Academy's 98th Flying Training Squadron, a place that uses the freefall experience to develop character in the young men and women who will soon be giving tall orders of their own.

Following their freshman year, hundreds of cadets welcome the opportunity to jump from the UIV-18B Twin Otter, which might say a little bit about

MORE THAN 100 MILES PER HOUR

the rigors of academics and military training that first year.

Though leaping into the wild blue yonder can test the mettle of even the bravest Airman, cadets learn everything they need to float safely to earth before they ever hear the jumpmaster's order, "stand in the door." In fact, students spend three days in intense ground training before even boarding the Otter. Starting at 0530, cadets learn the big and the little things that mean the difference between life and death.

Most importantly, cadets must pass a physical fitness test to ensure their readiness for the physical rigors of jumping. Following the PFT, they "leap" into the basics of freefall parachuting: the arch-count-pull sequence, parachute landing, and suspended harness training. The culmination of this training is Suspended Harness Level 4 - the final test to confirm cadets are ready to leap unassisted into thin air. Hanging suspended in a harness, they must react to a literal whirlwind of hazards as they are shaken, twirled, sprayed with water, and even

blasted with air from a leaf blower. Some cadets walk away from the test looking more shaken than they do after a typical jump — which is a good thing.

"It throws pressure at you that you're not used to," said jumpmaster Cadet 1st Class Mike Bush. He should know, at last count the well-respected senior had 536 jumps under his belt. The course may be like no other in the world in that 95 percent of the instructors are cadets, and even more unique — all training jumps are solo. The seriousness of the training provides one of the greatest opportunities for leadership development at the Academy.


As a jumpmaster, Cadet Bush has had plenty of experience in the air and knows that ground training greatly prepares his fellow cadets for the nerve rattling experience of freefalling.

"It's hard to simulate the experience on the ground, but we do our best to

prepare them for an abnormal pressure situation."

An "abnormal pressure situation" may be the best description for jumping from an airplane ever. But these cadets are used to pressure, and just about everyone who makes it into the aircraft doesn't land with it.

"On that first jump you don't know exactly what's going to happen," Cadet Third Class Trevor Steen said as he prepared for his fifth and final training jump. "I didn't get nervous until we took off, but once I got in the door, all my fear went away. The training just kicks in and you realize how good the school and the training really is."

Cadet Steen's fears never resurfaced. The next morning as the sun rose over the Front Range, he fell toward earth for the fifth time with a big grin on his face, knowing that when he landed he could then pin on one more achievement to his Air Force career, the basic parachutist badge. 

Cadet First Class Trevor Steen arches as he jumps from an altitude of 4,500 feet above ground level. Parachutists can reach speeds in excess of 100 mph when freefalling. This is Cadet Steen's fifth and final training jump, earning him the Air Force basic jump badge.

